

THE STORY OF THE BLACKS
CHAPTER XXVII. —The Practice Of Cannibalism.

Charles White

Reference has been made in preceding chapters to the fact that cannibalism was indulged in by many of the tribes. From the particulars gathered by those who have written on the subject, very little doubt remains concerning the prevalence of the horrible custom among the whole race, although it was more pronounced in those tribes where flesh food was difficult to obtain. In some of the localities where game was abundant it was resorted to but seldom, but even when there was no necessity for resorting to it on account of the scarcity of meat, it was practiced as a final act of triumph over a fallen foe, although in such cases the only part eaten would be the kidney fat—the idea of the feasters being, as some have asserted, that the strength and courage of the foe would be imparted by that means to them; but this point has been satisfactorily proved, and there is reason to believe that the choice was confined to that portion of the body simply from motives similar to those which prompt the epicure to reject the rough and insipid and favour the delicate and nutritious portions of the dish set before him.

The statement that the Australian aborigines were addicted to cannibalism has been more than once questioned, but the testimony of men who have had much to do with them—either as explorers or pioneer settlers, or as missionaries or protectors—and upon whose word absolute reliance can be placed, removes the matter beyond the region of dispute, and the facts narrated leave very little room for doubt that, although the practice was not a

general one throughout the continent, it was very extensively indulged in by certain tribes, not as a usage based upon superstitious notions, but as a means of gratifying an appetite for varied animal food. Among their unwritten laws there were some bearing upon this subject, and they were evidently made for convenience, so that the inclination might wait upon the duty, or vice versa, whenever the opportunity arose of fulfilling the one or gratifying the other.

In the "Port Phillip Herald", of 26th November, 1846, there appeared an account of an expedition undertaken from Melbourne to attempt the recovery of a white woman who had fallen among the Gippsland blacks, and Sergeant Winderedge, who was with the expedition declared that it was ascertained that the aborigines in that part of the country were in the habit of devouring the bodies of deceased gins, which they would roast or bake after their own fashion; and that they thus disposed of the bodies instead of burying them.

Mr. Simpson remarks of the aborigines of the northern part of New South Wales that, notwithstanding a great affection for their children, they are known in some localities to eat them when they died from natural causes; and it was the custom of the natives of the Colac district, on the occasion of the natural death of young persons, to deliver over the bodies to be eaten by the young women of the tribe.

The testimony of Mr. Seivewright, assistant protector in the Port Philip district for several years, is conclusive on this point. In one of his letters, a copy of which is before me, he gives a graphic description of a cannibalistic orgie at the camp of the Targurt tribe, of which he was an eyewitness, and in which he was invited to become a participant. There had been a fight between the Targurt and Bolagher tribes, during which a young gin received a fatal spear wound.

Despite the efforts at restoration made by Mr. Seivewright the gin died. About an hour after her death the tribe removed the body as if for burial, Mr. Seivewright following the procession, refusing to return to his hut when requested by the relatives of the dead gin. They then made signs to him indicating that they intended to eat the body, and despite his remonstrances they proceeded to cut up and divide it "without the slightest process of cooking." He describes the revolting scene in detail, and says that one woman cut off a portion and offered it to him, and that next day the relatives sent another portion to the hut for his acceptance.

Mr. Samuel Gason supplies an account of the rites connected with cannibalism as he saw them performed by the Dieyere tribe in South Australia, the relatives of the deceased in this case also being the honored guests at the disgusting feast.

In some of the Queensland tribes given to cannibalism, the slain in battle were always cooked and eaten, the bodies having been first "carefully skinned." The "hides" of the dead men were stretched on spears and dried in the smoke, after which process they were usually cut into strips, laid up in rolls, and given as souvenirs to the nearest surviving relatives, who always carried them in the grass bag over the shoulder. The bones were also preserved after being "picked" clean, but these were generally planted in a hollow tree with the skull.

In the early days of Bathurst, when it was a convict settlement, an event occurred which furnished clear evidence of the cannibalistic propensities of the aborigines of the Western district of New South Wales. An attempt had been made by one of the more adventurous of the pioneers who had crossed the mountains to establish a "station" about twenty-five miles further westward,

near the site of the now rising township of Blayney, then called King's Plains. As was usual in those days, three assigned servants were sent up to the spot to erect a hut and yards, preparatory to occupation with stock, but shortly after commencing work two of them fell victims to the savagery of the blacks, a united party of the Bathurst and Canoblas tribes being the assailants. The third man escaped the fate of his comrades by being temporarily absent from the camp, and he received a great shock upon his return, when he discovered the dead bodies of his two "mates" lying near the yard which they had been erecting—or what remained of the bodies, for the flesh had been in many places clean stripped from the bones of the arms, breast and legs, the bodies presenting a horribly mutilated appearance.

Three days afterwards some of the soldiers at the Bathurst barracks noticed that something unusual was going on at the blacks' camp near the river bank, and proceeding to the spot they surprised the blacks in the act of cooking human flesh. The gins had brought the flesh of the men who had been murdered at King's Plains down to Bathurst in their gunny bags, and the whole tribe were preparing for a cannibal feast. There were a few dead aboriginals in the neighborhood of Bathurst shortly after, when the news of the outrage at King's Plains reached the settlement. I had this story some years ago from the lips of one of the oldest "hands," who had crossed the mountains when but a boy as a convict, and I have no reason whatever to doubt the correctness.

I could multiply instances from the material gathered, but I have, I think, given facts sufficient to satisfy any reasonable enquirer that cannibalism was practiced by the aborigines. Whether the custom had been handed down through generations, or whether it was the outcome of the failure of animal food supply, is a question which I do not feel disposed to discuss. I record the

fact, and support it with testimony of the most reliable kind. Others may speculate upon the subject if they feel so inclined. The presence of Europeans in the neighbourhood of the tribes given to the practice appears to have led to its abandonment, as was the case with that other horrible practice of infanticide.

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